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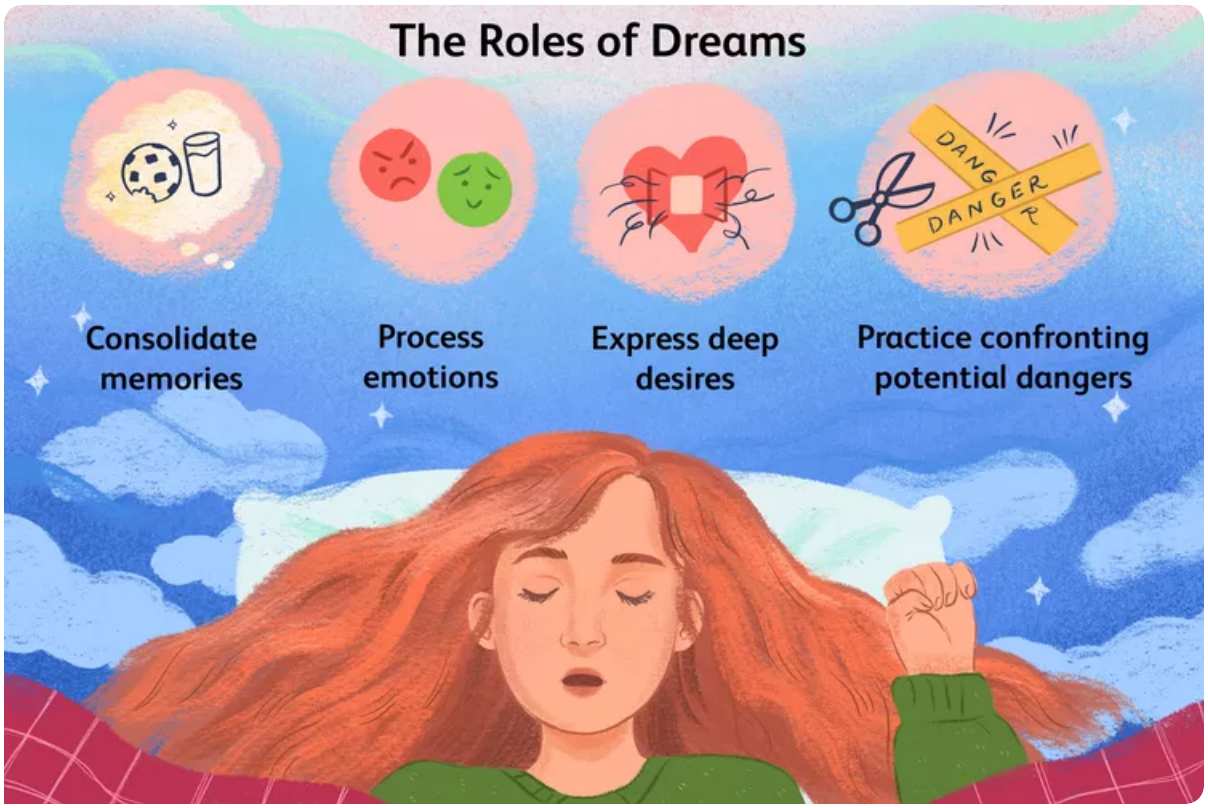
By Kendra Cherry, MSEd | Updated on June 05, 2023

Medically reviewed by Sabrina Romanoff, PsyD



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Despite scientific inquiry, we still don't have a solid answer for why

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7 Theories on Why We Dream

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experienced during sleep. Dreams can range from extraordinarily intense or emotional to very vague, fleeting, confusing, or even boring. Some dreams are joyful, while others are frightening or sad. Sometimes dreams seem to have a clear narrative, while many others appear to make no sense at all.

> There are many unknowns about dreaming and sleep, but what scientists do know is that just about everyone dreams every time they sleep, for a total of around two hours per night, whether they remember it upon waking or not.[1]

Beyond what's in a particular dream, there is the question of why we dream at all. Below, we detail the most prominent theories on the purpose of dreaming and how these explanations can be applied to specific dreams.

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How Do Scientists Study Dreams?

The question of why we dream has fascinated philosophers and scientists for thousands of years. Traditionally, dream content is measured by the subjective recollections of the dreamer upon waking. However, observation is also accomplished through objective evaluation in a lab.

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by the dreamers' reports upon waking. [2]

The Role of Dreams

Some of the more prominent dream theories contend that the function of dreaming is to:

Consolidate memories
Process emotions
Express our deepest desires
Gain practice confronting potential dangers

Many experts believe that we dream due to a combination of these reasons rather than any one particular theory. Additionally, while many researchers believe that dreaming is essential to mental, emotional, and physical well-being, some scientists suggest that dreams serve no real purpose at all.

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> The bottom line is, while many theories have been proposed, no single consensus has emerged on why we dream.

Dreaming during different phases of sleep may also serve unique purposes. The most vivid dreams happen during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, and these are the dreams that we're most likely to recall. We also dream during non-rapid eye movement (non-REM) sleep, but those dreams are known to be remembered less often and have more mundane content.[3]

Dreams May Reflect the Unconscious

Sigmund Freud's theory of dreams suggests that dreams represent unconscious desires, thoughts, wish fulfillment, and motivations.[4] According to Freud, people are driven by repressed and unconscious longings, such as aggressive and sexual instincts.

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While many of Freud's assertions have been debunked, research suggests there is a dream rebound effect, also known as dream rebound theory, in which suppression of a thought tends to result in dreaming about it.[5]

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In "The Interpretation of Dreams," Freud wrote that dreams are "disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes." He also described two different components of dreams: manifest content (actual images) and latent content (hidden meaning).

Freud's theory contributed to the rise and popularity of dream interpretation. While research has failed to demonstrate that the manifest content disguises the psychological significance of a dream, some experts believe that dreams play an important role in processing emotions and stressful experiences.

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Dreams Process Information

According to the activation-synthesis model of dreaming, which was first proposed by J. Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley, circuits in the brain become activated during REM sleep, which triggers the amygdala and hippocampus to create an array of electrical impulses.[6] This results in a compilation of random thoughts, images, and memories that appear while dreaming.

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> In the activation-synthesis hypothesis, dreams are a compilation of randomness that appear to the sleeping mind and are brought together in a meaningful way when we wake. In this sense, dreams may provoke the dreamer to make new connections, inspire useful ideas, or have creative epiphanies in their waking lives. [8]

Dreams Aid In Memory

According to the information-processing theory, sleep allows us to consolidate and process all of the information and memories that we have collected during the previous day. Some dream experts suggest that dreaming is a byproduct, or even an active part, of this experience processing. [9]

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This model, known as the self-organization theory of dreaming, explains that dreaming is a side effect of brain neural activity as memories are consolidated during sleep. [8] During this process of unconscious information redistribution, it is suggested that memories are either strengthened or weakened. According to the self-organization theory of

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when a person dreams about doing them. Studies also show that during REM sleep, low-frequency theta waves were more active in the frontal lobe, just like they are when people are learning, storing, and remembering information when awake. [10]

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Dreams Spur Creativity

Another theory about dreams says that their purpose is to help us solve problems. In this creativity theory of dreaming, the unconstrained, unconscious mind is free to wander its limitless potential while unburdened by the often stifling realities of the conscious world. In fact, research has shown dreaming to be an effective promoter of creative thinking. [11]

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dreams for their big "aha" moments.

> The ability to make unexpected connections between memories and ideas that appear in your dreams often proves to be an especially fertile ground for creativity.

Dreams Reflect Your Life

Under the continuity hypothesis, dreams function as a reflection of a person's real life, incorporating conscious experiences into their dreams.[8] Rather than a straightforward replay of waking life, dreams show up as a patchwork of memory fragments.

Still, studies show that non-REM sleep may be more involved with declarative memory (the more routine stuff), while REM dreams include more emotional and instructive memories.[4] In general, REM dreams tend to be easier to recall compared to non-REM dreams.

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Under the continuity hypothesis, memories may be fragmented purposefully in our dreams as part of incorporating new learning and

Dreams Prepare and Protect

The primitive instinct rehearsal and adaptive strategy theories of dreaming propose that we dream to better prepare ourselves to confront dangers in the real world. The dream as a social simulation function or threat simulation provides the dreamer a safe environment to practice important survival skills.[12]

While dreaming, we hone our fight-or-flight instincts and build mental capability for handling threatening scenarios. Under the threat simulation theory, our sleeping brains focus on the fight-or-flight mechanism to prep us for life-threatening and/or emotionally intense scenarios including:

Running away from a pursuer
Falling over a cliff
Showing up somewhere naked
Going to the bathroom in public
Forgetting to study for a final exam

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> explain why so many dreams contain scary, dramatic, or intense content. [13]

Dreams Help Process Emotions

The emotional regulation dream theory says that the function of dreams is to help us process and cope with our emotions or trauma in the safe space of slumber.

Research shows that the amygdala, which is involved in processing emotions, and the hippocampus, which plays a vital role in condensing information and moving it from short-term to long-term memory storage, are active during vivid, intense dreaming. This illustrates a strong link between dreaming, memory storage, and emotional processing. [3]

This theory suggests that REM sleep plays a vital role in emotional brain regulation. It also helps explain why so many dreams are emotionally vivid and why emotional or traumatic experiences tend to show up on repeat. Research has shown a connection between the ability to process emotions and the amount of REM sleep a person gets. [14]

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> Content similarities and common dreams shared among dreamers may help promote connection. Research also notes heightened empathy among people who share their dreams with others, pointing to another way dreams can help us cope by promoting community and interpersonal support. [15]

Other Theories About Why We Dream

Many other theories have been suggested to account for why we dream.

One theory contends that dreams are the result of our brains trying to interpret external stimuli (such as a dog's bark, music, or a baby's cry) during sleep.

Another theory uses a computer metaphor to account for dreams, noting that dreams serve to "clean up" clutter from the mind, refreshing the brain for the next day.

The reverse-learning theory suggests that we dream to forget. Our brains have thousands of neural connections between memories—too many to remember them all—and that dreaming is part of "pruning" those connections. [16]

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In the continual-activation theory, we dream to keep the brain active while we sleep, in order to keep it functioning properly. [17]

Lucid dreams are relatively rare dreams where the dreamer has awareness of being in their dream and often has some control over the dream content. Research indicates that around 50% of people recall having had at least one lucid dream in their lifetime and just over 10% report having them two or more times per month.[18]

It is unknown why certain people experience lucid dreams more frequently than others. While experts are unclear as to why or how lucid dreaming occurs, preliminary research signals that the prefrontal and parietal regions of the brain play a significant role.[19]

How to Lucid Dream

Many people covet lucid dreaming and seek to experience it more often. Lucid dreaming has been compared to virtual reality and hyper-realistic video games, giving lucid dreamers the ultimate self-directed dreamscape experience.

Potential training methods for inducing lucid dreaming include cognitive training, external stimulation during sleep, and medications. While these methods may show some promise, none have been rigorously tested or shown to be effective.[18]

A strong link has been found between lucid dreaming and highly imaginative thinking and creative output. Research has shown that lucid dreamers perform better on creative tasks than those who do not experience lucid dreaming.[20]

Stress Dreams

Stressful experiences tend to show up with great frequency in our dreams. Stress dreams may be described as sad, scary, and nightmarish.

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Experts do not fully understand how or why specific stressful content

health seem to go hand-in-hand.

Daily stress shows up in dreams: Research has shown that those who experience greater levels of worry in their waking lives and people diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) report higher frequency and intensity of nightmares.[21]

Mental health disorders may contribute to stress dreams: Those with mental health disorders such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, and depression tend to have more distressing dreams, as well as more difficulty sleeping in general.

Anxiety is linked to stress dreams: Research indicates a strong connection between anxiety and stressful dream content.[22] These dreams may be the brain's attempt to help us cope with and make sense of these stressful experiences.

A Word From Verywell

While there are many theories for why we dream, more research is needed to fully understand their purpose. Rather than assuming only one hypothesis is correct, dreams likely serve a variety of purposes.

Knowing that so much is left uncertain about why we dream, we can feel free to view our own dreams in the light that resonates best with us.

If you are concerned about your dreams and/or are having frequent nightmares, consider speaking to your doctor or consulting a sleep specialist.

22 Sources

By Kendra Cherry, MSEd
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RELATIONSHIPS

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The Interpretation of Dreams by Sigmund Freud

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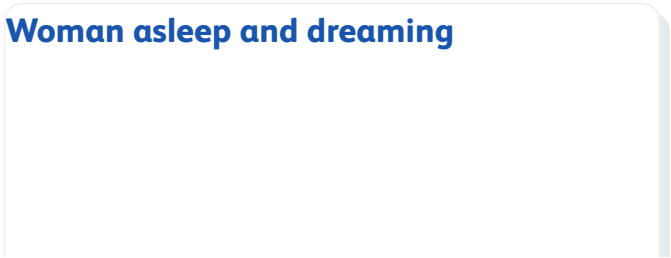
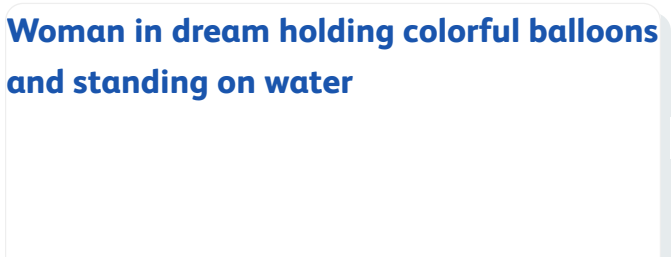


Woman asleep and dreaming



Woman in dream holding colorful balloons and standing on water

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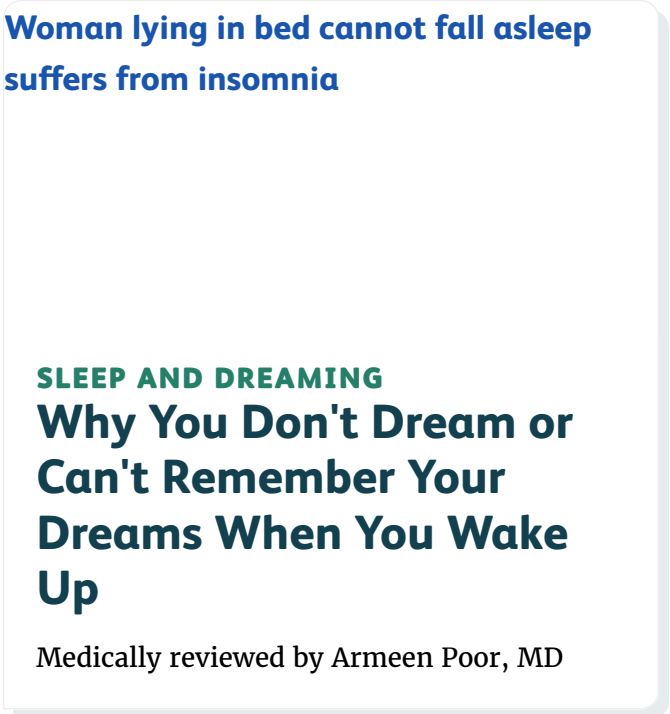

Woman lying in bed cannot fall asleep suffers from insomnia

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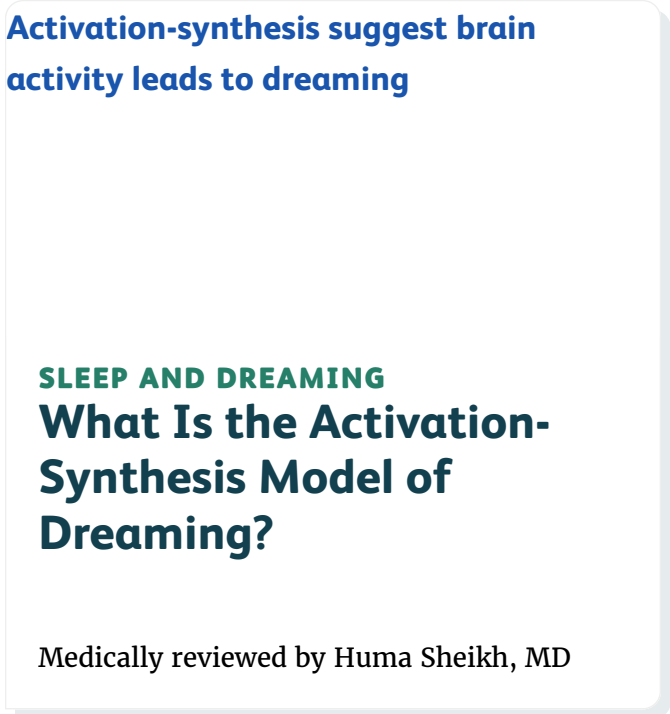

Activation-synthesis suggest brain activity leads to dreaming

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Couple sitting on bed having a conversation

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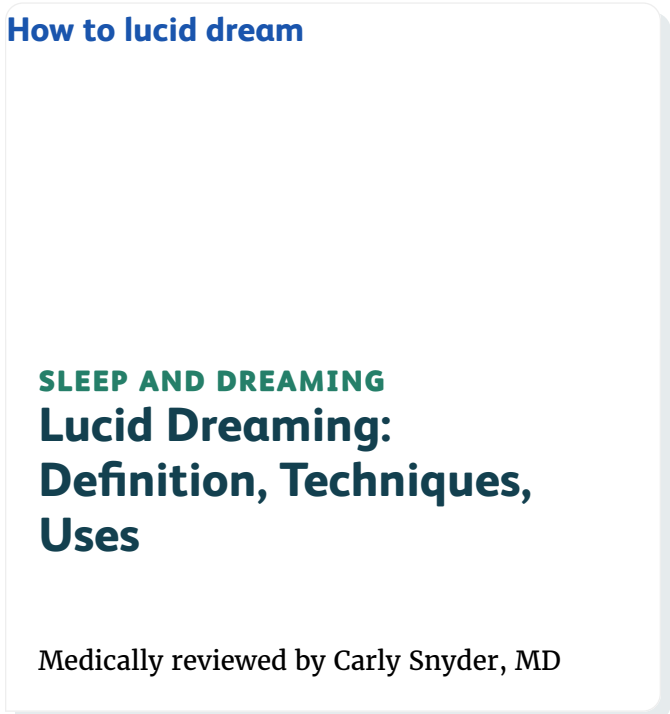

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